

You Just Never Know

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Whenever you work out in the field, dealing with the public, you just never know who will be walking in your door. As a Division of Workforce Development Supervisor for the past ten years I'm not saying I've seen it all, but certainly my share. This public people element may be the single biggest factor in keeping my job interesting.

Every person stepping up to that job center front desk has a story. Some are way too eager to share way too much information; others require advanced interrogation techniques just to retrieve basic information. After all they are dealing with government agents at the "Unemployment Office."

I don't see or deal with every individual that comes into our office, but I try to do my share when it comes to face-to-face, sit-down interviews with customers. This is often the time when the real story comes out, after the person becomes comfortable with me and the situation that brought them in actually surfaces. I'm not sure how it happens, but it seems that any person identified up front with a problem, unique situation, or otherwise not regular circumstance finds their way to my desk.

Interestingly enough, I have something in common with everyone I meet. I attribute it to my varied work background and personal interests. Commonalities make for great relationship builders. I have also found a friendly, welcoming smile calms the most reluctant of customers.

Since working at the Northland Job Center for the past two years I have literally had the opportunity to meet people from all over the world. Who knew that Kansas City, Missouri is the melting pot of America? This is my favorite part of the job, the opportunity to spend a few minutes hearing their story and experiencing their culture, language, and religion.

Often, I lead the conversation with a customer by asking, "What brings you in today? How can I help you?" Based on their education or work history information within our computer system it is easily recognized if an individual originated from another country. My next question is usually, "How long have you been in the States?" The answers have varied from four weeks to four decades, but my response is always the same, "We're glad to have you here!" Their response is always the same, a big smile.

Story Number One: This customer was in her early 40's and a recent lay off from a long-term job. She was in the Job Center for a required enrollment and was aggressively job searching. Her

plans to come to America started over 20 years ago from Venezuela, with the sole purpose to learn to speak English. The one person she knew that lived in the United States lived in Kansas City. He encouraged her to come to the middle of the country if she wanted to learn English so she wouldn't pick up the speech patterns of the coasts or the south. She came to Kansas City and never left. And she speaks great English!

Story Number Two: A couple found their way to my office, man and wife. The husband had been working in manufacturing, in a somewhat specialized position, for a very long time. But that day he was searching for new employment, as his job was no longer. As I worked with this customer I kept thinking back to my childhood, watching the Nightly News and scenes of war. You see, this man was my age, late 50s, but he grew up in Vietnam. How different our childhoods must have been. I printed off several possible job leads for him. Both he and his wife shook my hand multiple times; they were most grateful.

Story Number Three: Seems Cuba is back in the news. I had a first-hand history lesson a few months back. This gentleman shared his story of how he escaped and found his way to the United States over 20 years ago. With great passion he explained how he and three of his friends made their way in a small boat to Jamaica. From there he again succeeded, this time as a stow-away in a cargo ship bound to Puerto Rico. After considerable time, effort and money spent his family members in America were able to finally fly him to the States.

I asked him, "Now that relations have eased between the United States and Cuba will you be returning?" His response, "Nothing has changed. I left for a reason. I will never go back."

As I look back over my representative samples I realize I left out Africa, the Middle East, and Europe, maybe next time. I wonder who will be at my desk tomorrow. You just never know...